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AUTHOR	Dennison, John D.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In 1981, a study was conducted to explore the characteristics of students enrolled in career-technical programs in the community colleges and technical institutes of British Columbia. The first phase of a longitudinal look at these students, the study investigated demographic characteristics; educational, experience, and employment backgrounds; educational objectives; and immediate and long-range career and educational goals. Data sheets were distributed to students entering all career technical programs; 65% of the target population at the colleges and 46% at the technical institutes responded. Findings include the following: (1) the majority of the students were female, and at least 50% were over 25 years of age and enrolled part-time; (2) the educational and career levels of the students' parents were above the provincial average; (3) 10% of the students held bachelor's degrees while an additional 30% had undertaken some postsecondary study; (4) over 66% of the students indicated that their work experience related to their educational program; (5) students over 25 years of age reported enrolling to improve skills, while college-age students sought credentials; (6) "close to home" and "institutional reputation" were the most frequently cited reasons for enrolling in a particular institution; and (7) over 90% indicated that further education was included in their future plans. The study report compares results from the colleges and technical institutes. (KL)

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A PROFILE STUDY OF STUDENTS ENTERING CAREER/TECHNICAL PROGRAMS IN THE BRITISH COLUMBIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND INSTITUTES

Summary Report

Prepared for:

Academic Council of British Columbia
Victoria, B.C.

and

Program Services Division
Post-Secondary Department
Ministry of Education
Victoria, B.C.

Prepared by:

John D. Dennison
Gordon Jones
Glen C. Forrester

B.C. Research
3650 Wesbrook Mall
Vancouver, B.C.
V6S 2L2

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B.C. Research performs research, development and other technical work under contract to sponsors from government and industry.

Introduction

In August, 1981 the first phase of a major longitudinal study of students enrolling in career-technical programs in the colleges and institutes of British Columbia was initiated.* In several respects the design of the study is unique in the province. The major focus and direction of the project is to monitor the performance of these students from the time they first enter their program in the various institutions of post-secondary education, until they have been actively engaged in the work force for a period of two years after graduation.

Unlike previous studies conducted by the authors and others, which have examined different student populations at different stages of their education and training, this particular study will analyze the behaviour of the same group of subjects over an extended period of time and will hence be able to explore hypotheses which as yet have not been explored.

It will be possible, for example, to assess student withdrawal and completion rates by various institutions and by various technology groups. It will be feasible to match student objectives in undertaking the program with the degree to which such objectives are attained. The study is designed to explore some of the characteristics of career-technical students (such as age, previous experience, and educational background) and to determine if and how such factors are related to the students' performance in the program.

In view of the extent and cost of job preparation programs, and with the concern over selection processes which often apply to admission to programs with enrollment limitations, it seems important to undertake studies of this kind as a basis for future planning and policy making.

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*The study is being conducted by B.C. Research under the joint sponsorship of the Academic Council of British Columbia and the B.C. Ministry of Education.

Furthermore, the study is designed to produce important data on the issue of job placement and the relation between training and employment after eventual entrance into the work force.

The project described in this paper represents the first phase of the extended research program outlined above.

Description of the Study

The purpose of this first phase of the study was to explore various characteristics of the students enrolling in the career-technical programs in the colleges and institutes of British Columbia in September, 1981. Career-technical programs are those leading to certification in a variety of technologies including health, business, engineering, social services and other paraprofessional fields. Normally such programs are one or two years in length and, unlike "vocational" programs, do not involve students sponsored by Canada Immigration and Employment.

Career-technical programs are available in all fifteen community colleges and four provincial institutes* in the province. At the time of the study, there was an estimated target population of 16,410 students enrolled in career-technical programs, 10,670 in the institute system and 5,740 in the colleges. One college (North Island) and one institute (Emily Carr College of Art) were unable, for various reasons, to participate in the study.

The specific objectives of the project were as follows:

(1) To identify various demographic characteristics of students, such as age, sex, socio-economic status and area of residence;

*British Columbia Institute of Technology, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Justice Institute of British Columbia, Open Learning Institute.

(2) To determine students' background in terms of education, experience and employment;

(3) To identify the students' objectives for enrolling in a career-technical program, including their reasons for choosing the specific institution and program;

(4) To determine students' immediate and long term educational and career plans.

In order to reach the foregoing objectives a data sheet, containing 27 items, was prepared. Institutions were asked to distribute the sheet to entering students in all career-technical programs in the fall of 1981. The number of responses was 3,680 from the colleges, (65% of the target population), and 4,811 from the institutes (46%).

The data were gathered and processed by institution and by program cluster (approximately 40 different programs were involved in the project). The data were also subjected to statistical analysis in order to draw valid conclusions from the study.

Results

The result of the data analysis will be summarized* under a number of headings. In each case the focus of the discussion will be at the provincial level. Only with extraordinary results will reference be made to individual institutions.

*For further detailed results, see Forrester, G.C., Jones, G. and Dennison, J.D. A Profile Study of Students Entering Career/Technical Programs in the British Columbia Community Colleges and Institutes: Technical Report. Vancouver, B.C.: B.C. Research, 1982.

1. Demographic Characteristics of Students

Over two-thirds of the career-technical students in the college system were female, while the majority (53%) of the institute students were also female. Using age 25 as a conventional definition of adult student, the data indicated that half of the career-technical students were "adult". In the case of the Open Learning Institute, only one quarter were in the traditional college age (18-24) category. Further, while over half of the students were enrolled on a part-time basis there was considerable variation in this statistic among the institutions. All of the foregoing observations represent a new and interesting trend in enrollment in job related programs, a trend which will receive further comment later.

Over 75% of the students indicated that their previous place of residence coincided with the college region in which they enrolled, a figure which has implications for geographic accessibility of post-secondary education. Two of the provincial institutes, the Open Learning and to a lesser extent the Justice, tended to enrol students from a provincial base. The greater proportion of students in the study noted their intention to seek employment in their own geographic region. While 14% of the students indicated that they had moved to enroll in their program, only 4% of the adult group were in this category. Again, this statistic is a further reflection upon the concept of mobility.

The study made a limited attempt to assess the socio-economic status of career-technical students by seeking data on traditional measures such as father's occupation and mother's education. On the first measure career-technical students appear to come from a selective sample of the provincial work force. While 22% of the male work force are listed in managerial/professional occupations, 36% of the fathers of career/technical students fall into this

category. A similar pattern emerged with respect to mother's education. While 11.5% of students' mothers hold university degrees, only 3.5% of the female population ages 45 to 64 years are educated to this level. Conversely, only 11% of students' mothers had less than Grade 8 education whereas 24% of the provincial female population was in this group.

Concerning the students' sources of funds, it was noted that more than half of the students in the study depended on part or full time work to finance their education, by far the highest percentage being in the adult group.

2. Student's Background

With respect to previous education, career-technical students had attained levels generally higher than in the average population, particularly at the Grade 12 level (53% compared to 26% respectively). In addition, over 10% of the students held bachelors degrees, while a further 30% had already undertaken post-secondary study. As anticipated, adult students tended to have more previous education than the college age group. It was further noted that the more specialized institutes attracted a more highly educated student population than the colleges.

With respect to the backgrounds of work experience which career-technical students displayed, a number of interesting aspects were apparent. Very few students (less than 10%) entered directly from secondary school, while almost three quarters had been employed in the previous twelve months. Again, students enrolling in the institutes revealed greater experience in the work force.

Six job categories accounted for 73% of the students' work experience. Over a third had held clerical-related occupations, while sales and service jobs were also prominent. The profile of students' occupations proved to be a highly selective sample of the British Columbia labour force. Approximately two thirds of the students reported a relationship between the type of job held previously and the program in which they enrolled.

3. Student's Objectives for Enrolling in Program

An analysis of the objectives reported by students for enrolling in the program revealed two distinct categories. Adult students tended to undertake programs on a part-time basis with a large minority seeking a limited number of courses, apparently to improve skills and qualifications. On the other hand, college age students sought a first program credential, usually on a full time basis. In both categories "vocational skills" represented their major goal, although about 12% responded to "critical thinking" as a first objective.

When asked to report the reasons for choosing their particular institution, it was evident that two characteristics predominated, i.e., "close to home", particularly in the case of the college students, and "institutional reputation", for students enrolling in the provincial institutes.

There was strong evidence that despite the various levels of counselling available to potential students, the basis for the decision to seek further education lay with the individuals themselves.

4. Future Plans of Career-Technical Students

While the great majority of students noted occupational related activities in their immediate post-college plans, a significant percentage would continue their education in one capacity or another. The level of optimism reflected in students' views as to the availability of suitable jobs was mixed. While more than half were convinced that jobs existed in their own field and geographic area, almost a third confessed to a lack of information on the topic. With some reservations, students indicated a willingness to relocate in response to employment opportunities.

With respect to future educational plans it appeared that "lifelong education" had become a viable concept for over 90% of the career-technical students. Only a very small number viewed further education to be not a factor in their future life plans. The only educational institution which was specifically noted as a future choice by a significant number of the students was the University of British Columbia, which was reported by about 14% of the respondents.

5. Student Comments

Over 400 students took the opportunity to comment in an open section on the questionnaire. Issues which received particular attention included apprehensiveness about career choice, the financial costs of returning to school, lack of transfer arrangements to senior institutions, and the limited opportunities for part-time and evening study.

While several institutions received complimentary comments, the Open Learning Institute, with its distance education concept, was held in particularly high regard by many students who viewed it as the only viable option for continuing their education.

Conclusions and Implications

(1) The study described in this report incorporates data on almost 8,500 students who entered in the career-technical programs in post-secondary instititutions in British Columbia for the first time in September, 1981. While 3,700 of these students enrolled in the college system, 4,800 entered three of the provincial institutes--The British Columbia Institute of Technology, the Open Learning Institute and the Justice Institute. For the first time it was possible to make useful comparisons between the impacts of the two very different types of tertiary institutions.

It was evident that the specialized roles and functions of the institutes allowed them to develop a high public profile more successfully than the colleges, which have a broader and less focussed mission. While B.C.I.T. has along established reputation for quality education, the Open Learning Institute appears to have rapidly developed a high degree of support. Virtually all of the latter's students are part time, adult, and primarily female. It was evident that O.L.I. represented the only viable option for further education for many students through its distance learning format.

(2) The results of the study dramatized the rapid evolution of the profile of career-technical students in British Columbia. In the last ten years the proportion of adult female students has grown to the point where well over half are in this category. While there has been similar growth in part time enrollment, several colleges indicated a very limited number of part time students. This raises the question of whether administration policies may have influenced such enrollment. Further, such policies, if in place, might well be examined in the light of colleges' traditional commitment to part time study. While vocational programs may well be restricted to full time students in the light of funding policies, the same constraint is not necessarily valid for career-technical students.

(3) There was clear evidence that geographic mobility was not an option for many students, particularly in the case of adult students for whom only 4% had relocated to attend college. While the necessity to reduce program duplication in various institutions is acknowledged, the consequences for older students must be recognized.

The data on socio-economic background of career-technical students supported previous conclusions that, while colleges and institutes have democratized educational opportunity to some extent, their students still represent a selected sample of the population in socio-economic terms. For a variety of reasons, access to post-secondary education in British Columbia is still somewhat limited. It might be argued that expanded opportunities for part time, evening study in many career-technical programs would allow for the participation of students from broader socio-economic levels.

Further speculation stems from an analysis of the educational background of students. The fact that only 10% of career-technical students came directly from secondary school raises the question as to whether this statistic is coincidental or a clear consequence of admission policies which offered limited access to younger students who apply directly from high school. Certainly, there is concern about general access to job related programs by parents and counsellors who work with high school graduates.

The study revealed that career-technical students fall into two major categories in terms of their goals and objectives. The first category comprised college age, full-time students seeking a first occupational credential. The second group are largely

adult, part time students who hold a variety of jobs and are seeking to upgrade their skills and qualifications. While the data suggest that both groups are given consideration by institutions, there is an indication that job upgrading will become a greater concern in the future and that part time study opportunities need to be extended.

Given the huge majority of students (80%) who expressed the intention to continue study in one form or another in the future, the idea of "lifelong learning" is a healthy and vibrant concept. Institutions would do well to recognize this phenomenon in their planning activities. Furthermore, the widely held intention of students to continue their education in other institutions dramatizes the need to overcome the current lack of easy transferability among the various elements in the system.

Final Comment

Although the conclusions and implications developed in this "entry profile" project are useful, it must be noted that they represent only the first phase of a study which will monitor these students from their initial admission until they have experienced time in the work force.

It will be important to assess the extent to which students' objectives are attained. Accurate data on withdrawal, program completion and job placement rates will supply critical understanding of the values of career-technical programs in British Columbia.

None of this is possible without a longitudinal phase-by-phase analysis of student progress. The interesting set of conclusions and implications reached through this entry profile are only the beginning of a much longer process.

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